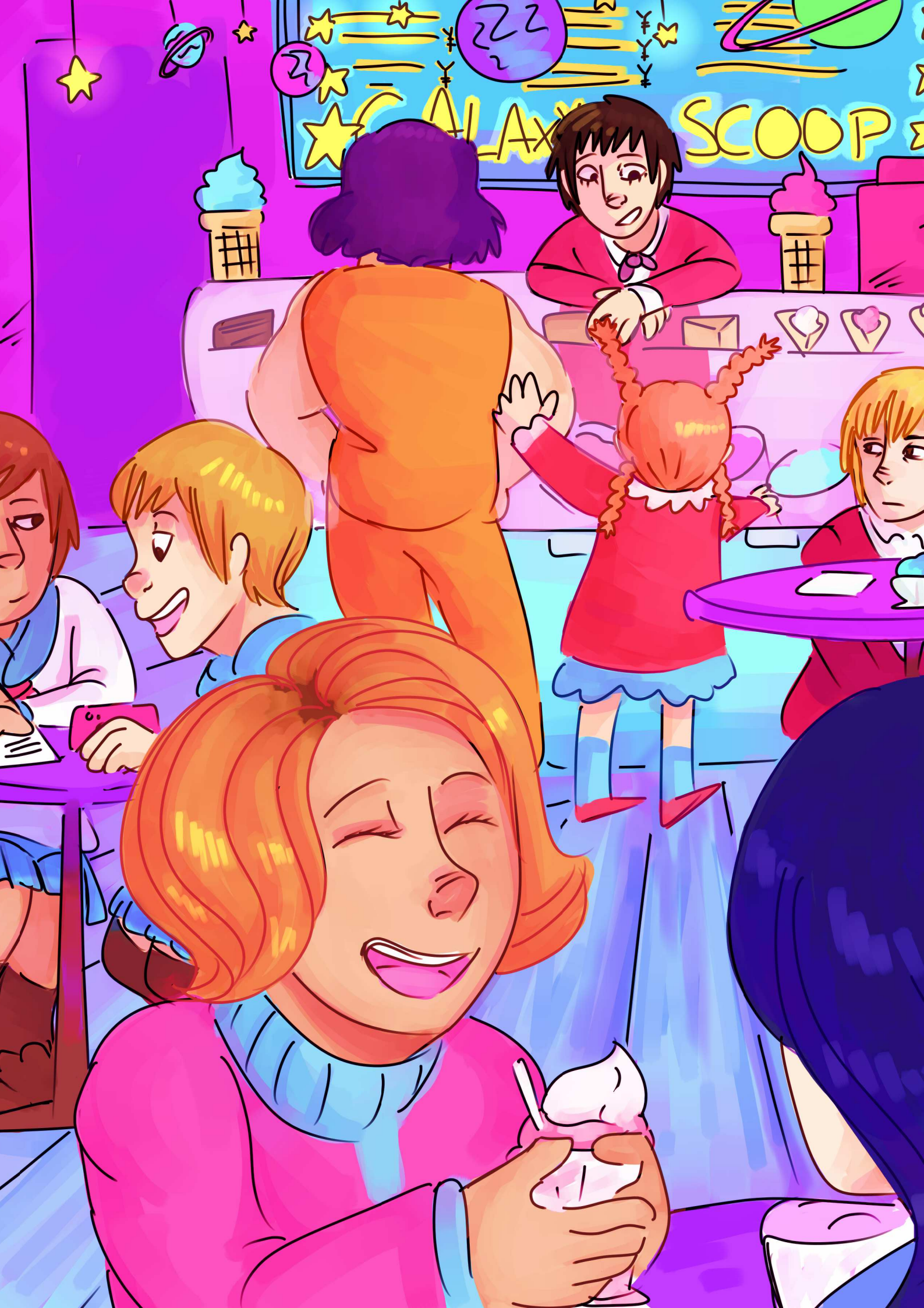
Sugar and Spice: A Mob Psycho 100 Fanzine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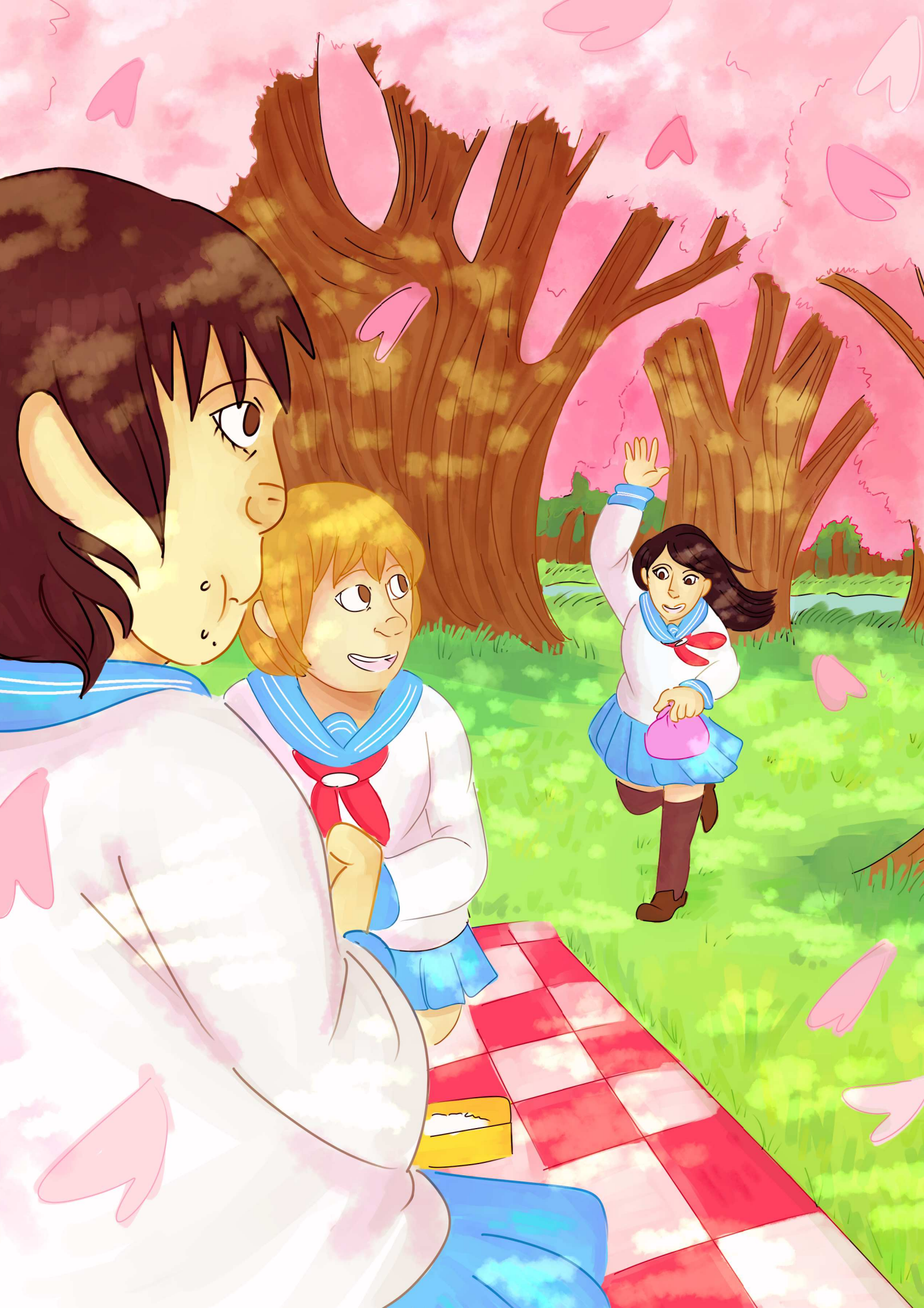
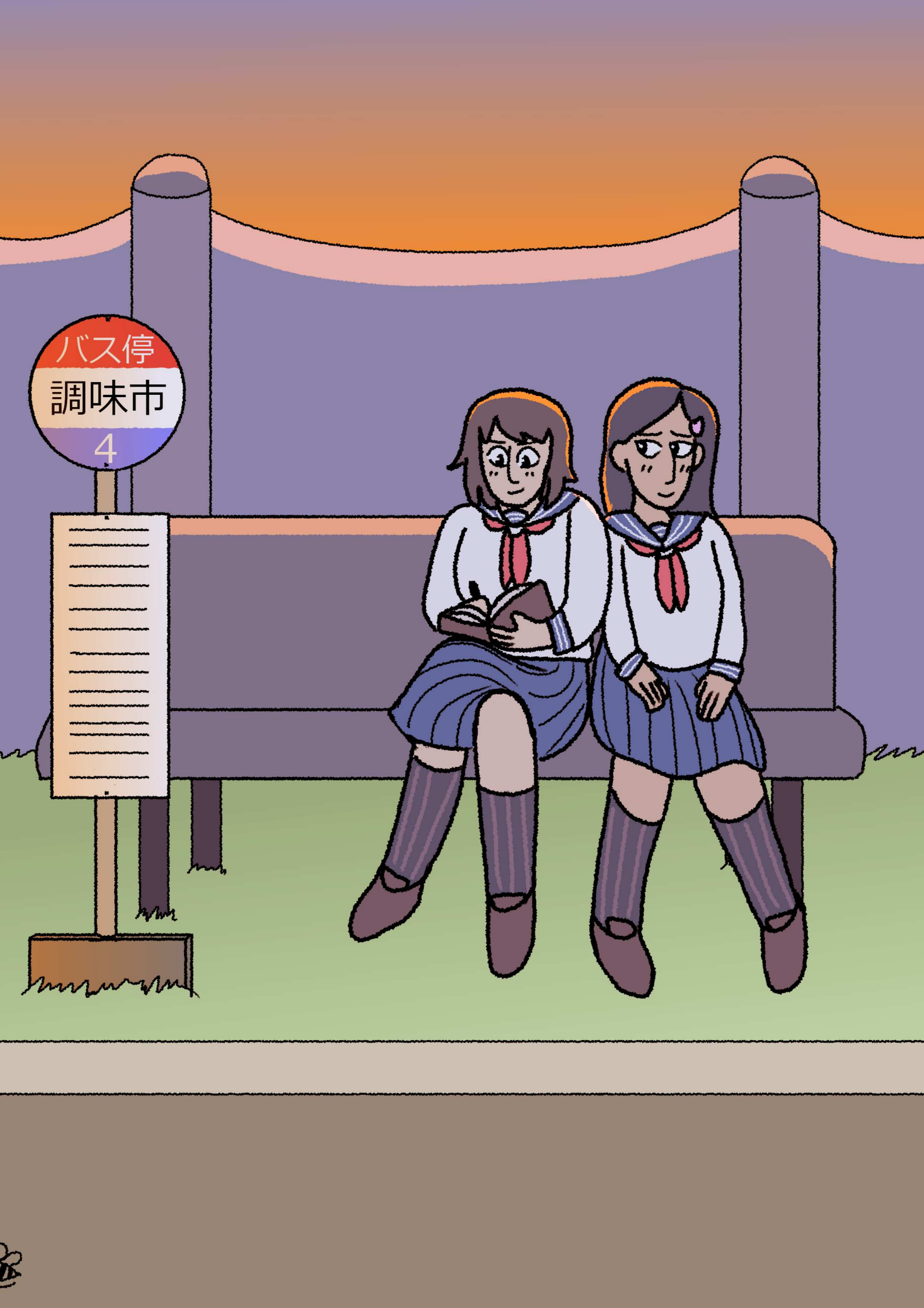
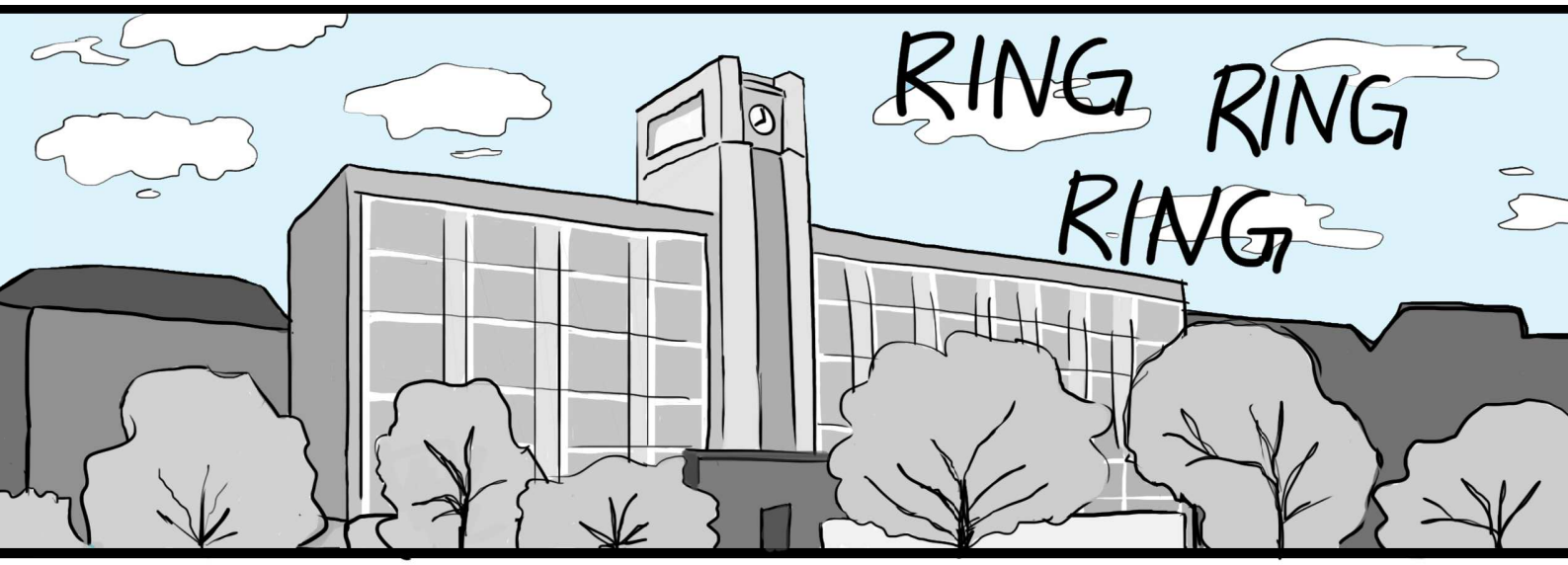
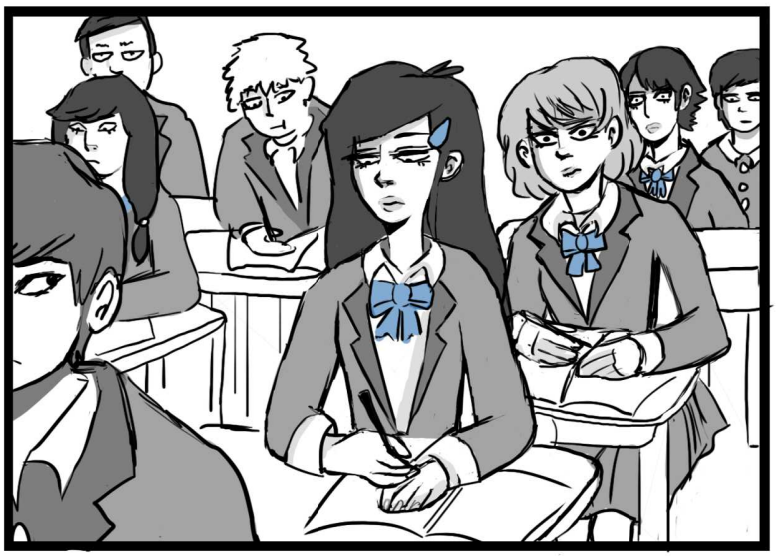
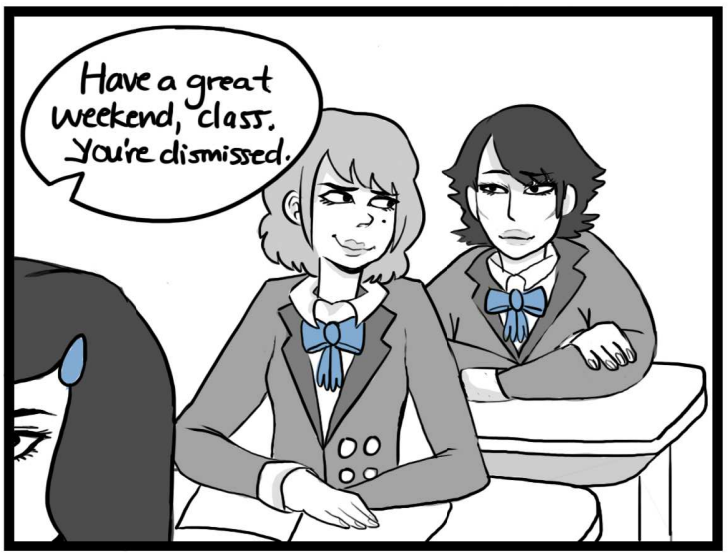


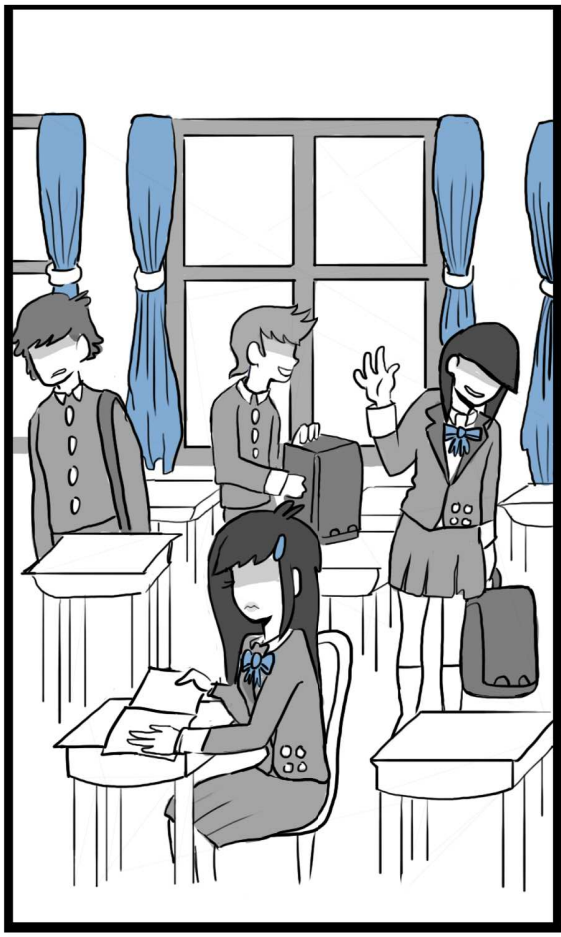

バス停
調味市
4

So do you think I went with Plot A or B?
hm...


RING RING
RING

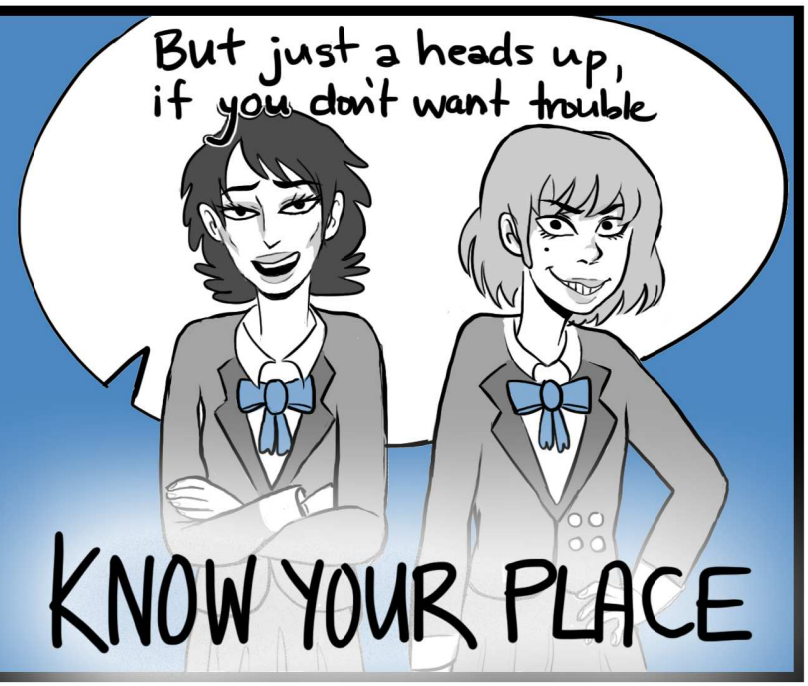


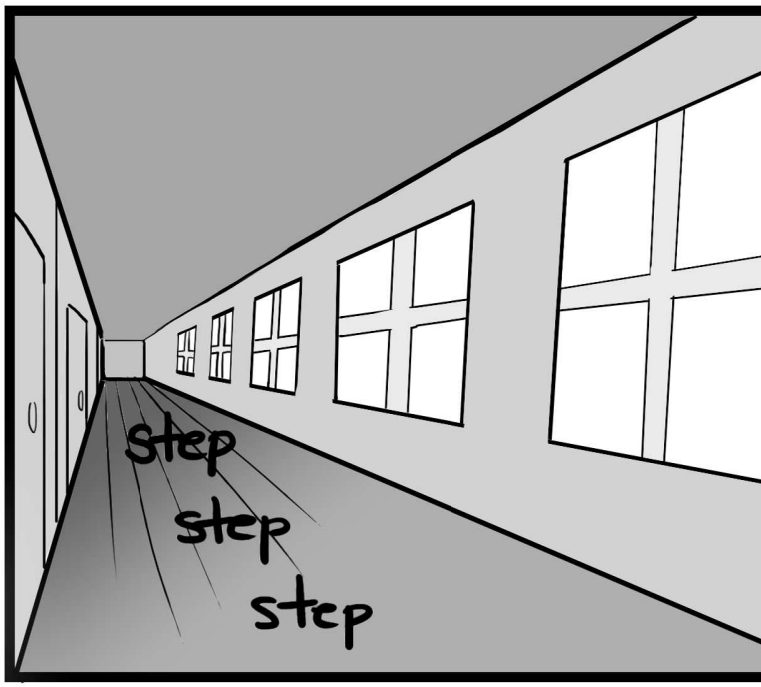

Have a great weekend, class. You're dismissed.



HEY NEW GIRL

Nice to meet you! Wow you're even prettier in person
Caused quite a stir at school, haven't you~♥


But just a heads up, if you don't want trouble
KNOW YOUR PLACE

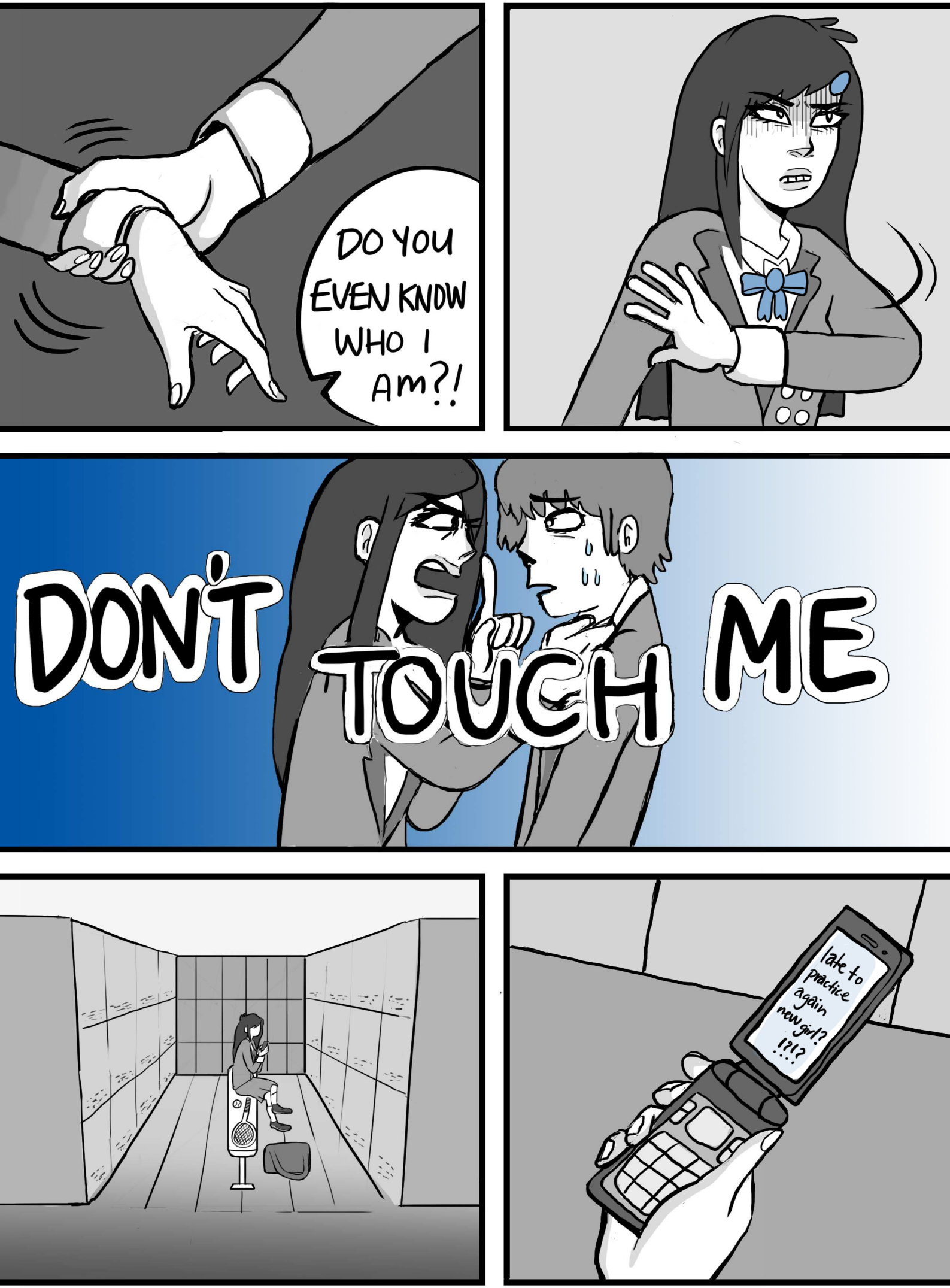

step
step
step

HEY, WAIT UP!

I've admired you ever since you moved here. You're the most beautiful girl in Tarragon Mid, you know?
So I...
gotta ask.
Will you go out with me?

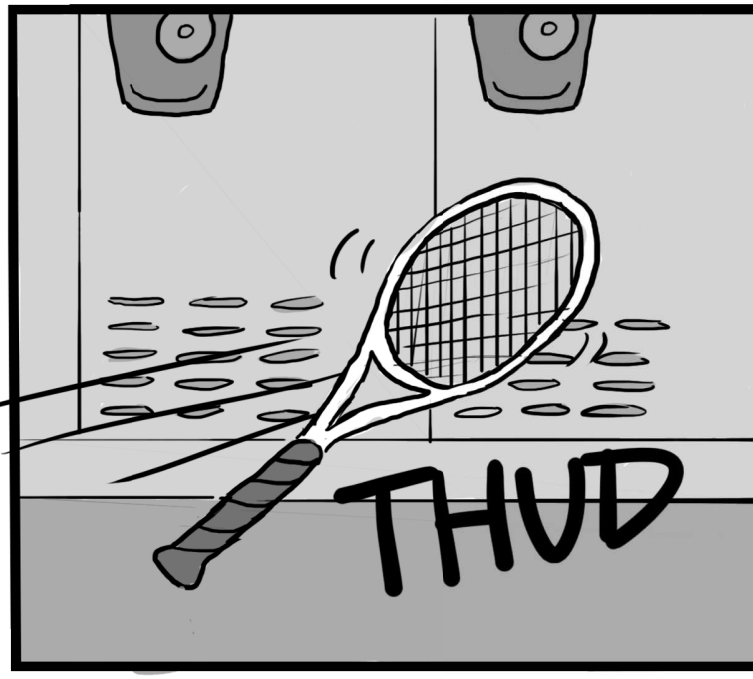
Sorry, I don't feel the same.

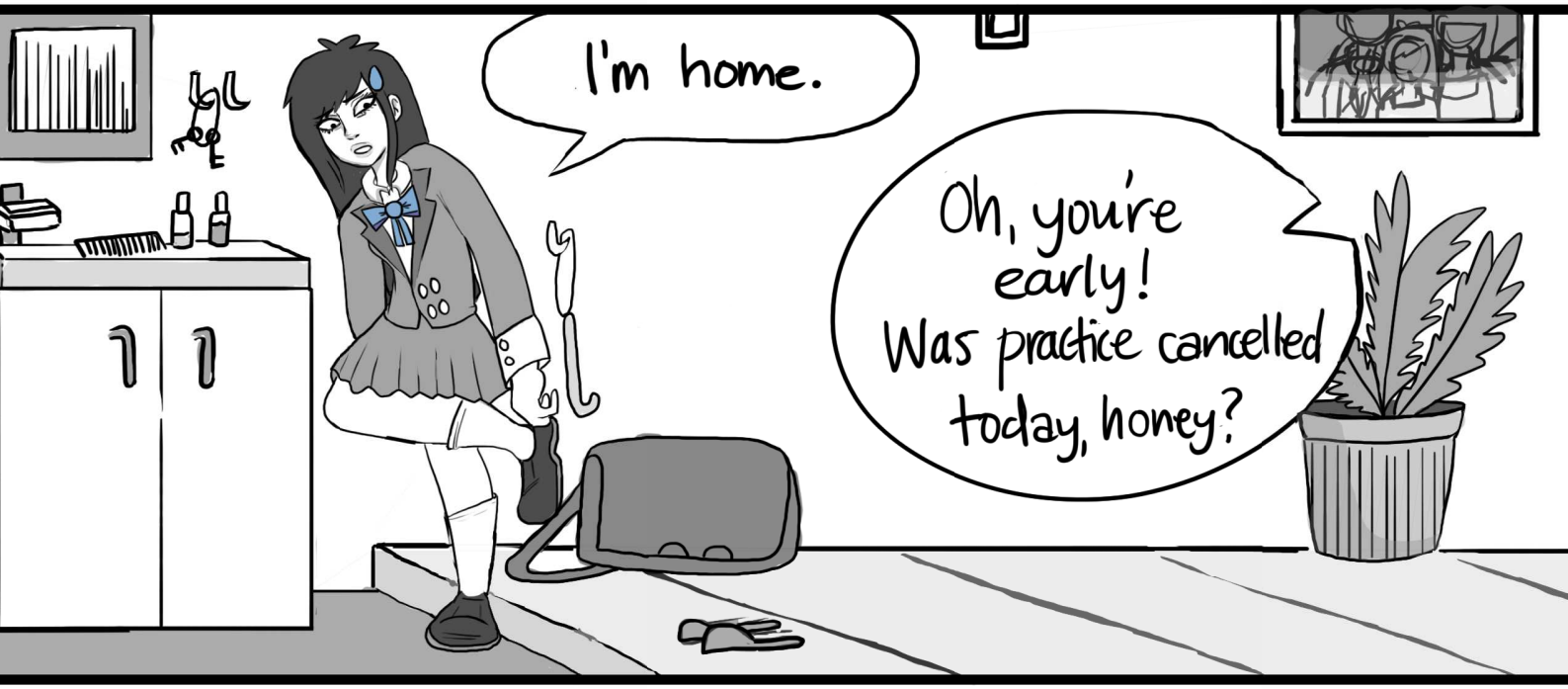
What the hell?!?!


DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHO I AM?!
DON'T TOUCH ME
late to practice again new girl? !?!?

i heard u turned hiroshi down (°O°;;
think ur better than everyone???

16:18
don't think ur so nice b/c everyone hates u lmao
16:18
LOL
16:19
dumb bitch
16:20


THUD


I'm home.
Oh, you're early! Was practice cancelled today, honey?

Is everything alright at school?
頑張れ
Making friends?

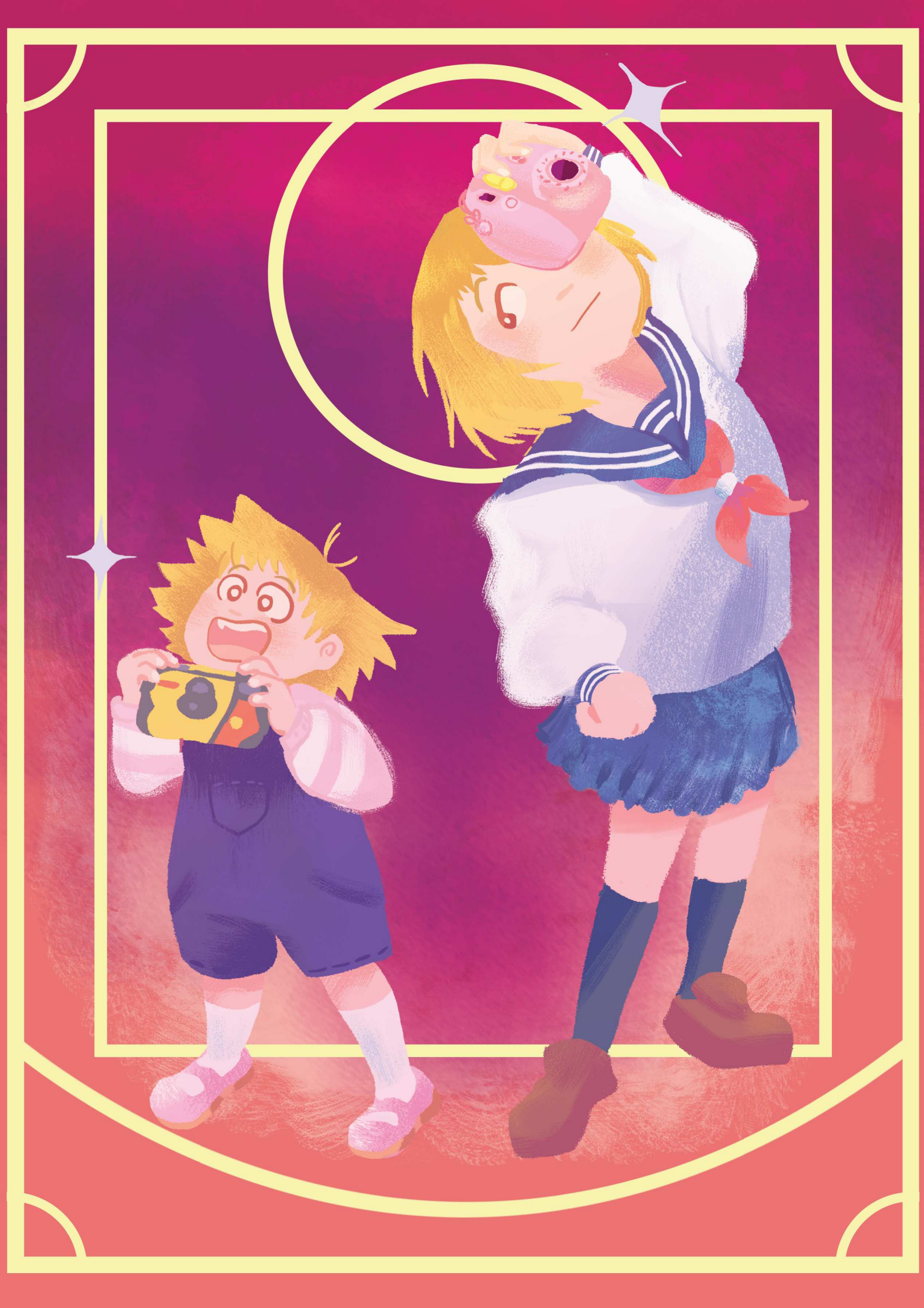
TSUBOMI
ARRIL
Reminder
!!!
Mmhmm

. . . Alright.
Dinner's at seven.
Okay.

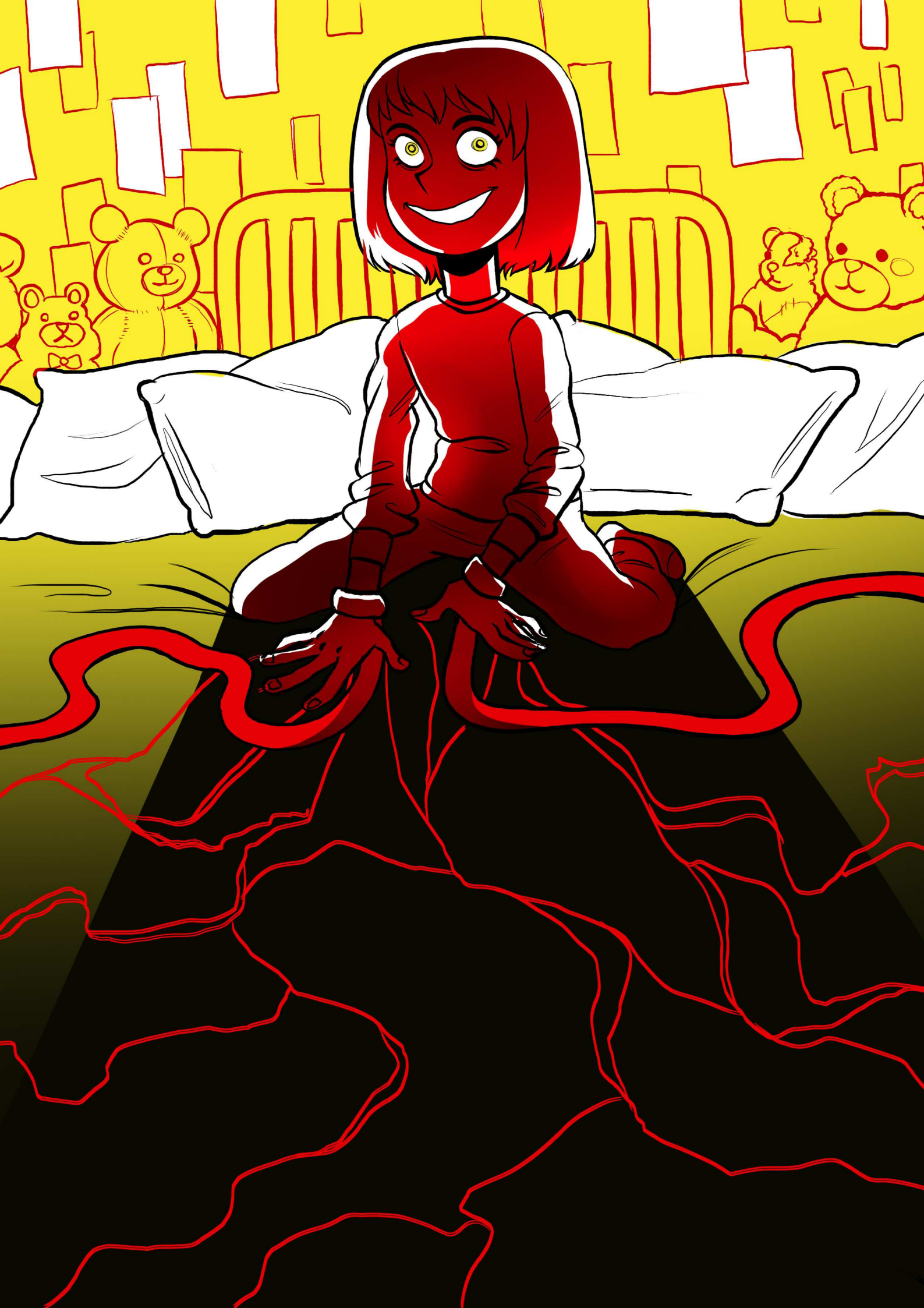
Hello, Mob-kun?
Tsubomi-chan! ...Is everything okay? How have you been?
I'm fine. I just wanted to say...thanks for being a friend.
...even though I haven't always been one for you.
JELLyana

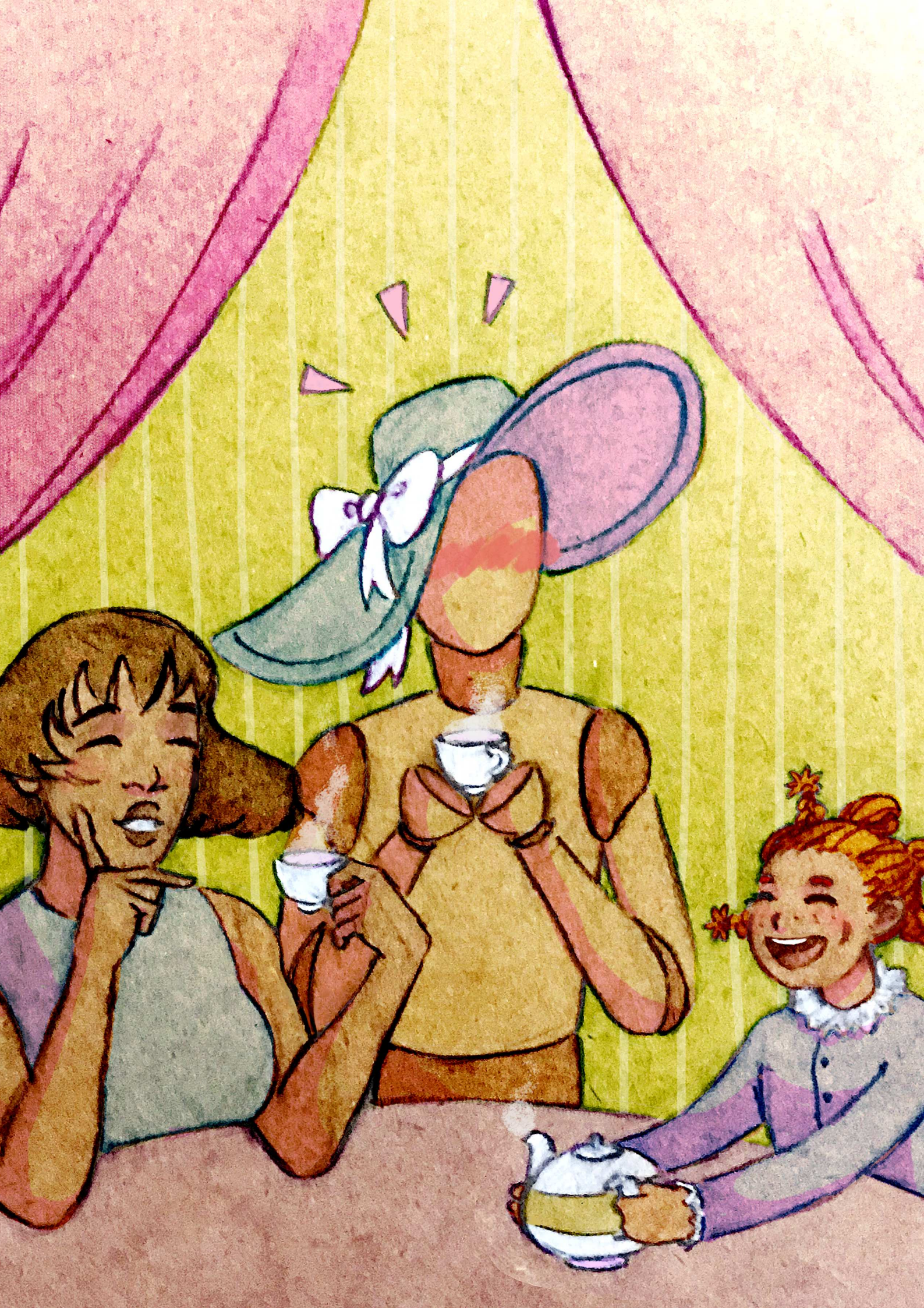
NEW!
SPECIAL!

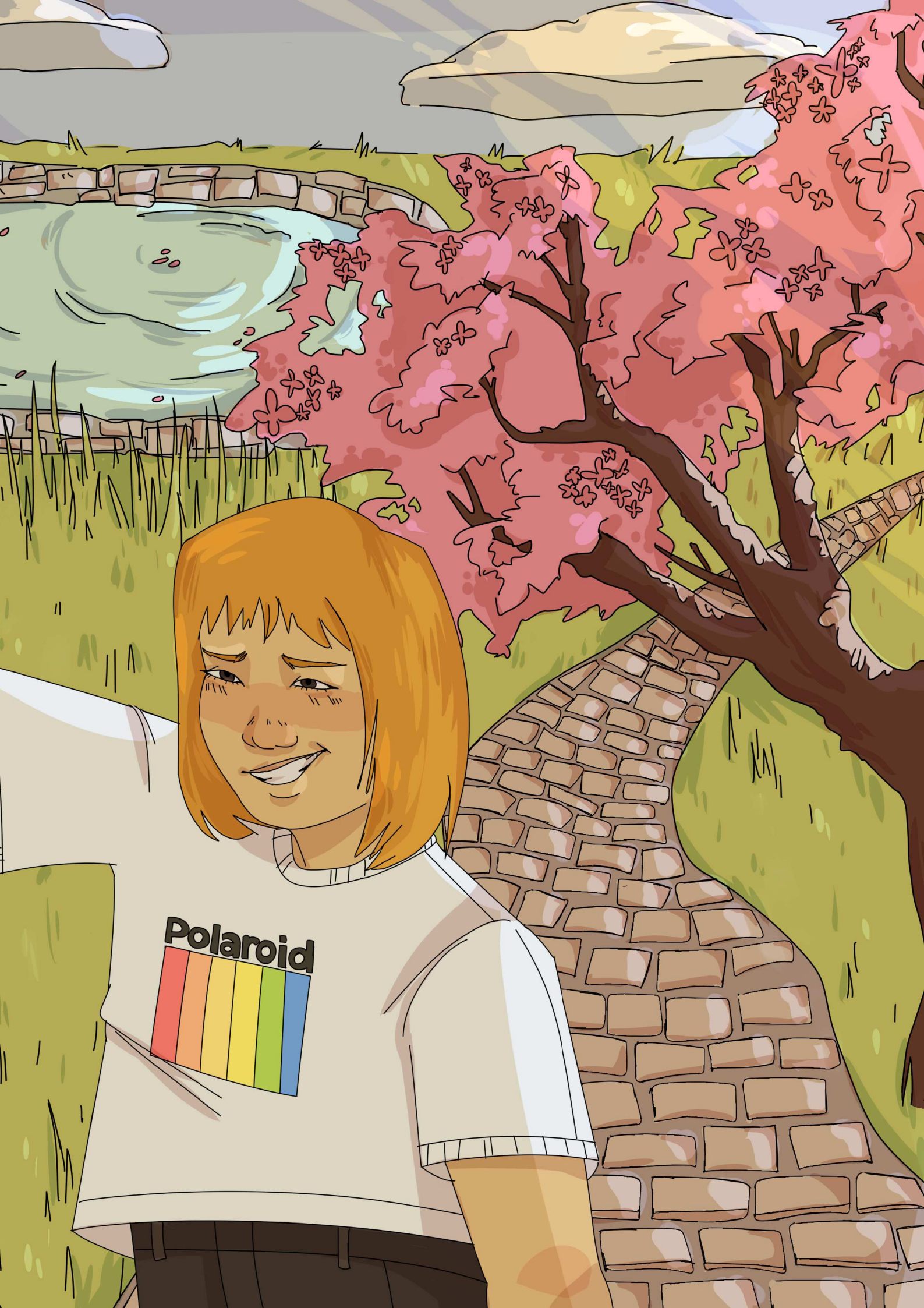
nqtrne



BEEF STATIC






Polaroid

hit the ground running

"Duck!"

She hears the shout and drops without a second thought. A burst of flame rushes overhead, hot enough to heat her armour for a painful instant, and Tsubomi can't bring herself to care about the foul taste of mud that splashed in her face when she hit the floor. Not if it meant avoiding a hit that would've surely killed her.

She spits into the dirt. "You call that watching my back?"

"I told you to duck, didn't I?" Minori shouts back, and Tsubomi fights the urge to turn around and glare at the other girl. They can't afford to get distracted over something like this.

The tell-tale sound of channeling magical energy starts up again, a low hum that has meant nothing but trouble ever since they started this so-called adventure.

More like a fool's errand, she thinks before the noise is cut short with a monstrous cry, and Tsubomi looks over her shoulder to see Ichi lower her bow triumphantly. Following her line of sight, she finds the arrow lodged deep in the shadow monster's side. It bellows furiously and moves to attack, but this distraction was all the time Tsubomi needed.

She hefts her mace and jumps up, immediately taking off at a sprint. The wind rushes past her, threatening to drive her back, but a deft leap off various boulders strewn on the floor takes her out of harm's way and she swings--

Metal thorns slice through thick smoke like butter until they reach the centre, and with a final *push* Tsubomi tears out the monster's core. Her mace slams to the ground, crushing the crystal into the dirt with a satisfying *crack*.

With nothing holding it together, the smoke dissipates, and all that's left are the sooty stains it leaves behind on her armour.

She readies her weapon a second time, ready to deal with the other shadow monster that had blocked their path. It's bearing down on Tome, who looks almost comical as she ducks and dodges its swings while playing a jig on her accordion. She's jeering, taunting it, and suddenly the attacks halt and the monster freezes in place.

"Ha!" Tome laughs, then jumps to the side. "Now!"

As soon as the words leave her mouth, a precise jet of ice hits the monster in its chest, strong enough to push the black crystal at its core out through the back. It thumps to the ground and immediately, nearby roots dig their way from the earth to wrap around it, snaring it tightly. The second crystal breaks, and with it, the path is cleared up.

Tome whoops loudly. "We did it!" She plays a quick victory chime before swinging the accordion around on its strap to sit on her back. Rei offers a high five for their joint effort, which she happily obliges.

"We sure did," Tsubomi hears Minori mutter from behind her. She turns to see her rummage in a bag, presumably putting away her spellbook. She sighs.

"It happens," she says and smiles at Minori. "None of us are hurt and we can continue looking for the prince, that's all that matters."

The other girl seizes her up, frowning as she takes apart Tsubomi's exhausted mask of optimism. Neither of them knew what they were getting themselves into, searching for the crown prince that ran away so many years ago. For all they knew, he was dead.

Minori's lips twitch into a smile that tells Tsubomi that they share a reason for agreeing to this man-search. Besides Prince Ritsu's pleading, of course.

Even a dead king was preferable to the usurper that currently occupied the throne.

Minori shrugs. “Fine, let’s go.” She brushes past Tsubomi. “Rei,” she calls, “the crystals.”

Rei looks up from where she’s crouched by the remains of the crystal her roots had crushed earlier. She nods. “I know, I thought the same thing.”

Tome leans down to look at the shards as well. “What’s going on?”

“Those crystals were magical in origin, but the magic they use isn’t exactly from around here,” Rei explains. “My guess is that they come from the eastern border of the kingdom, which means we’re getting closer.”

Tsubomi perks up. “How muc—”

“I wouldn’t touch that if I were you,” Minori interrupts, and they all turn to see Ichi holding out a hand to pick up the black shards of the monster she and Tsubomi destroyed. “They’ve been infused with shadow magic, get it in your bloodstream and we’ll have to crush you into powder next.”

She pulls her hand back as if burned. “No need to be so descriptive…” Her gaze meets Tsubomi’s disapproving one, and she grins cheekily. “We defeated them, didn’t we? I bet they’re worth a lot.”

“I’m just saying.” Minori steps up to her. ”Someone who knows what they’re doing should handle this one.” Ichi raises her eyebrows mockingly and Minori tilts her head. “Me. I’m talking about myself.”

Tsubomi shakes her head and walks to the edge of the clearing. The forest beyond seems thicker, even less inviting than the stretch they already had to cover ever since they landed on these shores three days ago. The air is still now that the excitement of battle has calmed down, almost as if the forest was holding its breath.

She hears equipment rustle, and a moment later Ichi joins her side. Her arms are crossed. “Someone’s been here,” she says, frowning as she looks into the distance, searching. “There were footprints other than ours.”

“Do you think it’s them?” Tsubomi asks.

“Maybe, I’m not sure. They would have to be close, though.”

“It has to be them, Tsubomi,” Minori says, levitating the shards over her palm as she comes to stand with them. “Who else would try to throw us off like this?”

“Gee, I wonder,” Ichi mutters, just loud enough for them to hear. Tsubomi grinds her teeth but says nothing.

“Uh, guys?” Tome clears her throat. She’s perched on the largest boulder, picking at her teeth. How did she even get up there? “Don’t know how helpful this is but I was doing a bit of detection— checking the area for more monsters and all, you know how it is.”

“Good thinking!” Rei pipes up.

Tome points a finger gun at her and grins. “Yeah, I thought that might be useful. Mostly magic, since the monsters were magical. Those had huge signatures by the way, I mean *wow*.”

“Yes, and?” Tsubomi motions for her to go on.

“Here’s the thing,” she says, and while her voice still retains its laid-back drawl, her eyes are sharp. She meets Tsubomi’s carefully, then slowly points a finger down toward the base of the boulder she’s sitting on. “There’s still some low-level magic happening, like, *in* this clearing.”

Tsubomi freezes.

Then, the moment passes and they all fall into motion.

“Close off the exits!” She shouts just as unseen steps throw up dust in an attempt to escape. Before they can get very far, a wall of ice erupts from the ground, surrounding the clearing. Tsubomi draws her sword, Ichi her bow, and Minori levels the shards higher, as if to use them as projectiles.

“Show yourselves!” she snarls, spreading her fingers threateningly. “You heard what I said earlier, don’t think I won’t throw these.”

They hear someone yelp, followed by a creative curse and the shuffling of footsteps. “Fine,” a disembodied voice calls after a moment, a few meters away from where Tome is still lounging on her boulder. “We give up. Put away your weapons first!”

Tsubomi squints, but lowers her sword slowly, then motions for the others to do the same. She takes a few steps in the direction of the voice and finally sheaths it in plain view.

There’s a pause, then another curse, and the voice tells their companion to drop the spell. Shimmering, the magic dissipates, revealing two figures. Two men, dressed in merchant’s clothes, one a little taller than the other. The shorter man with auburn hair steps forward, hands raised in a peaceful gesture, while his companion remains frozen to the spot, shoulders raised apprehensively.

“Good afternoon!” the shorter man greets loudly. His smile practically screams practiced and Tsubomi decides she doesn’t like him. “The name is Reigen Arataka, world’s greatest wizard, what can we help you ladies with?”

Minori snorts.

The smile wavers but doesn’t fall. He looks at Tsubomi instead. “Surely carrying magical objects and using magic is not a crime?”

“Those shadow beasts?” Tome hops back down onto even ground. “They could’ve killed us! What were you thinking, siccing them on us?”

“‘Defend thyself if threatened, to arms if besieged’,” he quotes the royal book of law, and of *course* he would have memorized this line.

“Defend? We didn’t even do anything to you,” Rei says, growing exasperated.

“But you could have.”

“Enough,” Tsubomi snaps. All eyes fall on her, including the ones belonging to the second man. They look familiar – too familiar. She raises her chin slightly. “We are here on the authority of his Royal Highness, Prince Ritsu.”

She pauses there, gauging reactions. Reigen licks his lips nervously, looking at her armour properly for the first time. It carries the royal insignia, emblazoned on her chest, recognizable despite the stains of battle.

To her surprise, the other stranger remains impassive.

"Tsubomi?" Ichi walks up to her, holding up a sheet of paper. Reigen's face is plastered on its front and the text surrounding it— "A wanted poster."

"Wh—!" Reigen starts and stares at Ichi, patting himself down. "Where'd you get that?"

She shrugs. "Watch your surroundings, there's all kinds of pickpockets in these woods, you know."

He starts to step forward but a pointed raise of hands from Minori stops him in his tracks.

Tsubomi directs her attention back to the wanted poster. The writing is crude, as is the frankly awful painting of Reigen. It's still recognizable but all the proportions are off, especially the ones on his nose. There is no royal stamp of authenticity, either. She holds it up incredulously. "What is this?"

Tome peeks over her shoulder and laughs. "Who *drew* this? It looks terrible!"

"Now *that*," Reigen says and folds his hands in front of him. "Is an excellent question. One that we've been trying to figure out as well, actually. The top suspects are the baker in Worcestershire, and the uh, the—" He turns around to face his companion. "Hey Mob, who was the other guy?"

Mob starts at his mention and quickly looks around between them, as if he hadn't been paying attention. Reigen looks at him expectantly and he coughs awkwardly. "Oh, it was the Tewkesbury Inn's owner. You promised to teach her basic spellworking in exchange for a room, but you woke me up at six in the morning, so we could leave before you had to del—"

He's interrupted by a hurried hand over his mouth and Reigen laughs loudly. "What he *means,*" he says, glaring at Mob. "Is that we suspect one of the

two to have formed a grudge against me based off a simple misunderstanding. There is no need to resort to extremes, am I right, Miss Royal Guard?"

With a huff, Tome sits down on the floor. "What makes you think we're interested in you? I doubt she's allowed to arrest you if there's no official decree for it."

The look of perplexion on his face makes Tsubomi smile despite her best efforts to stay serious. Tome may have just given away their bartering card, but it was almost worth the waste.

Ichi takes the wanted poster from her hands and gives it a snide glance. "Yeah, it's not like you even look like the guy we *are* looking for."

Oh.

Hesitating, Reigen lets go of Mob. "I don't?"

Tsubomi can tell he's trying very hard to figure out where they're going with this, but she decides to let the others take over for now. Stoic silence is a very underappreciated tool, after all.

"No, you're much too old," Rei comments and Tome snickers.

"Yeah, honestly, what are you? Fifty?"

"More like seventy, by my guess."

They continue giggling and Minori rolls her eyes and steps forward. "We're looking for someone around my age." She puts a hand on the dagger hanging at her hip. "Dark eyes, dark hair, striking similarity to the prince? Hm!" She tilts her head in mock-thought. "Since I just saw that guy a week ago, I'm pretty confident when I say that your friend fits that description rather well!"

--

Tsubomi holds up her hands. "Wait, you can't say that! It's too straightforward!"

“Well, how about you say something better instead?” Minori takes a handful of popcorn from the bowl on the table leans back against her chair.

“I was being silent on purpose, you know, intimidating?”

She crunches down on a kernel. “Uh huh, I’m pretty sure you have to say that out loud. Or roll for it.”

“Minori’s right,” Emi says with a smile. “That’s an intimidation check. Who are you trying to intimidate?”

“Well Mob, obviously. He’s the crown prince, right?”

Emi just shrugs.

--

Reigen stares at Minori, confused and bewildered, as if he can’t begin to fathom what she just said. Mob, on the other hand, looks frozen, even more so than when they first had to reveal themselves. He’s pale and growing more so by the second, eyes darting around to find a way out of this situation.

For an instant, they meet Tsubomi’s glaring ones and he stops abruptly.

Without breaking eye contact she reaches into her armour and retrieves a folded piece of parchment. It’s old and weathered, and the younger prince’s name is scrawled on the back in hasty writing. Mob‘s eyes widen at the sight of it, surprised, or even scared.

Bingo.

“You recognize this letter, don’t you?” she asks.

--

“Oh!” Ichi sits up. “Hold on, while the two are doing that, I’m gonna try to pickpocket Reigen again.”

Minori laughs and grabs more popcorn. Then, on second thought, she picks up the bowl and puts it in her lap. “Why?”

“Why not?”

“Can’t argue with that!”

Tapping her pen to the sheets in front of her, Emi snorts but nods. “Sure, you’ve got disadvantage though.”

“What? Why?!”

“You literally just took the wanted poster from him, he’s on the lookout now.” She points at her sceptically. “You *warned* him about pickpockets, Ichi.”

Tome leans over the table. “So, what if I try?”

“Why would it be different for you?”

She picks up her glass and starts slurping pointedly. “Because I’m just good.”

Tsubomi and Rei burst into giggles while Emi covers her face with both hands.

--

“What’s this? You never told me about it.” Minori reaches for the parchment but Tsubomi snatches it away before she can touch it.

“Prince Ritsu entrusted me with it before we left the castle,” she says by way of apology. “He said it would help me identify his brother.” Lifting it up for all to see, she raises her voice a little. “A letter from Crown Prince Shigeo to his brother on the day he ran away, leaving him to deal with the responsibility of being king of—”

--

She blinks. “Emi, what’s the name of our country?”

“Hm?” Emi smiles at her.

“You know, the kingdom?”

“Oh, I heard you the first time.” She continues to smile.

Minori stops eating and leans forward. “What are you doing, I know that smile. Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

Setting her glass down, Tome picks up a few sheets strewn about on the table and looks through them. “Hold on, I think I know what this is.” She flips a page and raises an eyebrow at Emi. “The name of the country…” Tome leans forward. “Is Far Far Away.”

With a snap, the tip of Ichi’s pencil breaks against her character sheet. “*We’ve been playing Shrek?!”*

No longer able to hold back her laughter, Emi brings a hand to her mouth, shoulders shaking. “Actually, it’s Shrek 3!” she manages, and now she’s cackling loudly. She claps once. “You should see your *faces!”*

Tome can only stare. “I have never had more respect for you than in this moment,” she says and pats Rei on the shoulder, who is holding her head in her hands and muttering something along the lines of *how could I miss that?*

“I’m not ruining the drama in this scene by calling him the King of *Far Far Away*!” Tsubomi looks between the others, horrified. The rest of her party seems too preoccupied to offer help, so she picks up one of her die and starts fidgeting with it.

Emi coughs, then laughs again. “You don’t have to!” She rolls a d20 and scribbles something on her notes. “While you guys are distracted, Reigen throws a smoke pellet on the ground.”

“What!”

“You can barely make out as he grabs Mob by the wrist and they both take off.” She rolls again. “There’s a boom as something shakes the ground and suddenly, big shards of ice fly past you; something has shattered the barrier Rei put up earlier.”

“No! We have to go after them!”

Emi looks around the party. “Everyone in agreement?” Five eager nods immediately follow, and she picks up her dice and holds it up dramatically. “You’re in pursuit of a wizard and a rogue, both intent on losing you. You’ve only barely seen what they can do, but you know that you cannot afford to lose this fight.”

She pauses.

“Let’s roll initiative.”

20-20

Seeing is something everyone takes for granted. It is one of the five senses, yet the one we rely on the most. We, as humans trust our eyes too much, and base everything on what we see, not what we know. However, as a psychic, it is almost as if you have a sixth sense. Another extension of yourself used for whatever reason you can fathom.

For some people, it's communication, communication without words. A silent speech. They are connected with each other, and can hear things others cannot. For some that feeling is overwhelming, like an all consuming sea of sound that exists constantly without control. Others control a substance. Like fire, or plant life. However, there are people in this world who can control many things. Hanazawa, the Kageyamas, Suzuki. They are incredibly powerful.

"And I'm not," she said, fists curling into a ball on her knees, looking down at the carpeted ground. "So I would not be much help-"

"Are you kidding? You're great!" Tome said, cutting in. It was a good old fashioned girls only sleepover. Rei was seated on Tsubomi's bed, Tome was on Mezato's sleeping bag with Tsubomi in it, and Mezato was in the bathroom.

"Yeah but I'm not as powerful as the others!" It was true. Her predictions weren't always right. Like Asahi's flame she felt her confidence flicker out. "I'm not as good as them."

"I know very little about this uh, psychic powers stuff," Tsubomi but in, her face illuminated with the soft pink light Tsubomi had in her surprisingly girly room. It was a soft pink lava lamp, and was the only light in the room, causing the medals and trophies from her successes in tennis to gleam in the soft ligh. "However, the fact that you have them in the first place should be cool right?"

“Yeah! You’re not like that stinky old man Reigen,” Tome said, hunching her back and rubbing under her nose. “I’m Reigen Arataka, and I’m the best psychic in the 21st century!” she said, imitating his voice. Her imitation elicited a laugh from Tome and Rei, and an awkward chuckle from Tsubomi.

“That's not exactly what I was going for but okay,” Tsubomi said rolling her eyes. “Why are you even restricted to a specialty? Kageyama can do whatever he wants with his powers, why not you?” It was an optimistic question, open-ended and trying to offer insight. And yet the fire burning in Rei grew, she frowned, crossing her shoulders,

“Because he's special. You know he's special, you've known him longer than I have, and yet you still think I have the capabilities that he has? I don't.” The door opened suddenly, causing Tome to jump a little, warranting a giggle from Tsubomi.

“Get off my stuff!” Mezato yelled, marching up to the two dark haired girls. They scattered and Mezato whipped Tome’s pillow right at her. It struck her in the face, causing her to fall over, pretending to die. Tsubomi hid behind Rei, whispering.

“You’re still important you know. Just because you don’t have as wide of a potential as other people doesn't make you any less amazing,” Tsubomi said, hands gently placed on Rei’s shoulders. Rei couldn’t see her face, but she could feel her breath tickling her skin, causing her to flush. A rush of wind flew past Rei’s face, and she watched as Mezato clocked Tsubomi square in the face with a pillow.

“And that’s what you two get. God, can’t you just leave my stuff alone?” Mezato puffed her cheeks, pouting. Rei could only laugh. “Rei is the only good one here.”

“Yeah but we were having an emotional moment, Mezato!” Tome piped up, sitting straight up as if she wasn’t pretending to be dead a moment ago. “A pillow massacre was hardly necessary.” Mezato frowned in suspicion, but her investigative nature helped guide her eyes to Rei’s pensive and nervous posture.

“Oh, I see.” Mezato’s rage seemed to melt away, leaving a kind smile that all of the girls were incredibly familiar with. “Rei, are you comparing yourself to others again?”

“No I just am n-”

“Shh..” Mezato put a finger over Rei’s mouth, silencing her instantly. “You’re plenty amazing Rei. This argument is three to one. Majority rules that you are amazing.”

“But-” Rei tried to counter with, something, anything to get her friends to listen. But instead she was dove upon by all three girls. The pile of girls toppled over onto the bed, in one giant hug. It made Rei’s heart pound, her face growing redder from heat, lack of circulation, and, well, girls.

“Clairvoyance is really cool,” Tsubomi said, laughing,

“Yeah you can cheat on tests with that!” Tome butt in. “Like multiple choice questions, or like-!”

“Rei would never!” Mezato cried, “She’s too sweet. She’d probably cheat on a test for someone else.”

“But I’ll never do it for you,” Rei added, the laughter couldn’t help from exploding out of her mouth. She felt like she could be here forever, in a puddle of laughter and friends.

Hindsight is 20-20, but seeing the future isn’t quite so perfect.

Achilles at Troy

Bravery takes a thousand different forms, puts on a million different faces, comes into the world in too many ways to count, and Tsubomi knows almost all of them. She's tried on many of its masks, moved through each of its motions, found herself familiar with all of its ways. Sometimes bravery was staring down a tennis player with biceps the size of her head and not even blinking once. Sometimes bravery was answering a math question in the middle of class with a confidence she didn't feel. Sometimes bravery was watching Spice City tear itself apart at the seams and waiting in the middle of a park, in the middle of a tornado, in the middle of the end of the world, because Tsubomi Takane had made a promise and Tsubomi Takane didn't break her promises.

Today, bravery wasn't an action. It was a non-action, the sort that was never really talked about, but was important all the same.

The makeup that sat on her bathroom counter was nice. Expensive. Mostly gifts, if Tsubomi kept track of it. She had been putting it on her face since the last years of elementary school, and at first, it had been fun. It made her feel mature and fancy and special, but as elementary turned into middle school, it became an obligation. A tiresome obligation, and every slip-up or amateur error on someone else was turned into something to point at, something to whisper about. Still, it was undoubtedly worse for the girls who wore no makeup at all. It became a proper mask after that, something used to avoid getting hurt because she had no doubt that her friends would turn on her like starving dogs if they spotted one bit of discoloration, one tiny bit of mascara staining under her eye, one slight lipstick smudge on a busy Monday morning when it ought to have not mattered at all. It was a source of constant anxiety, one that turned her to face masks and acne creaks and all of the setting spray her mother was willing to buy. The anxiety never fully went away, just subsided like ocean waves before roaring back again and throwing her against the shore, utterly merciless.

Tsubomi considered the clock. She had twenty minutes before she had to leave. That was more than enough time for foundation and lipstick and breakfast while glancing at vocab flashcards. She ought to cover her face, hide the tiny freckles that weren't connected enough to be cute and the bit of darkness under her eyes and the weird spot under her nose that always looked slightly more red than the rest of her skin. It was what was expected. It was what she always did, and there were mornings harder than this one. Mornings where she wanted to wear makeup less than this one. Mornings where she was more sick of her own popular girl games, more sick of how the popular girl games were played by adults more than anyone else, more sick of how life seemed to be made up of meaningless games instead of actual experiences. This day was ordinary and unexceptional. There was no need to break routine. Tsubomi should just pick up the foundation brush and do her job.

She didn't.

Maybe it was the sun that did it, rising slow and steady in the sky and spreading light on the bathroom floor. Or maybe it was her own tiredness—third year brought everyone to their knees, and Tsubomi wasn't an exception to that rule. Maybe it was the tests that day, so numerous that counting them was like counting all the stars in the sky, that persuaded her not to care because there were so many other things to worry about. Or maybe it was fact that she had tennis practice after school and the makeup would be sweated off anyways, or maybe it was any number of mundane factors.

In the end, Tsubomi came to the conclusion that it was the slow buildup of everything that gave her the exhausted boldness of ancient samurai, the sort of boldness that let her enter the world bare-faced and bewitching in a way that good girls ought not to be. She didn't question her decision, didn't question what made her act on the impulse she fought for months on a random day in the middle of September. There was no time for that. She simply followed through with it and went to the kitchen for breakfast, flashcards in hand, just like always.

the stuff both dreams and nightmares are made on

On the bench across her sits a girl looking a little older than she, who's been sitting there for a while, making her way through a chips package at a gross volume and reading some kind of magazine.

Minori hopes she'll leave soon and not only because of the crunching.

There are said to be mysterious lights right above this spot in the park, set to appear any moment now. It's far-fetched, but it might be spirit-related; might help her find out more about what happened to her.

And even if it's probably nothing, it would be a pain if chips girl got in the way. Especially since it's rare for daddy to let her out by herself this late - this including the bodyguards waiting for her in a nearby parking lot.

There's the ugly thought that Minori knows kids like her, that she's driven kids like her to despair - that if she wanted, she could've *made* her leave back then, but she pushes it away.

Chips girl stretches. For a moment, it seems like she'll finally leave, but no. She goes right to her phone, typing something.

Probably texting. Minori used to do that; spent every other minute doing it. Now the spaces where her former contacts were leave her feeling shitty - maybe because she misses the easy comfort of having them at her beck and call. Maybe it's because she can't stand the reminder of who she was.

Well, she tells herself vindictively, if the girl had an internet flat like her own, she wouldn't bother with something boring like this, and pushes that thought away too.

If she'd just finally leave.

Minori glances at her, but this time, the girl returns her stare, her eyes narrowed and intense.

“Hey,” the girl says, “I’m Kurata Tome. What are you still doing around here?”

Biting back an acidic reply, Minori smiles at her, choosing to keep her last name to herself just in case, even if the girl doesn’t look like someone who'd recognise the renowned Asagiri name.

“Hello, I’m Minori. I’m enjoying the fresh night air. How about you, Kurata-san?”

At least this lets her probe subtly.

“Yeah, yeah, me too,” Kurata says, looking less than enthused by the concept of fresh air. “By the way, there's rumors of some kind of light show around here. You heard of them?”

...Minori did not expect Kurata to reply with this little subtlety, but maybe this is for the best. If they're here for the same reason, the girl might turn out to be actually useful. Still, she's wary about being this honest with a stranger - she keeps her investigation under wraps.

“Yes,” she replies, refraining from running her hands over her bag, which is filled with precautions against the supernatural. “I heard some rumors about their source too.”

There. An invitation to share ideas with the possibility to back out. Maybe if she just keeps her name out of this to avoid touchy questions, it'll be fine.

“Me too!” Kurata says, moving over to Minori in a flash and shaking the bench with her sudden enthusiasm.

“It's aliens,” Kurata says with the grim, utterly convinced tone of voice of a seasoned conspiracy theorist’s.

“It might be a haunting,” Minori says, equal parts conspiratorial and amused, ready at the drop of the hat to laugh her words off.

They both stare at each other, unimpressed.

“Why does everyone only care about spirits?” Kurata asks flatly. “Aliens are much cooler.”

In that moment, lights flash, blinding and surreal. Minori squints and it’s like the world slows and comes into focus, from the cool air to Kurata’s wide eyes and following triumphant cackling.

There’s a start of, “I told you-” and then her intestines turn themselves inside out and Minori’s memories cut off.

*

Minori comes to to a sharp pain in her cheek and intense bug-eyes barely visible in some faraway red glow. “Ouch!”

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Kurata says, releasing Minori’s cheek and clapping her on the shoulder forcefully. “You ok?”

“Yes,” Minori says with a certainty she doesn’t feel. She feels weak and dizzy and foreboding, like something is deeply wrong, but that’s nothing. She’s missing her bag, which makes her feel even more on edge.

“Good,” Kurata repeats, “I don’t know first aid anyway.”

Then she goes and buzzes into the darkness of the room, touching the walls with badly hidden excitement.

“Where are we?” Minori asks, following after her so she doesn’t get out of sight. Even though this girl is even weirder than she thought, they only have each other in whatever this place is.

“We got abducted, obviously!” Kurata replies with inappropriate cheer. “It’s actually not my first time,” she confides, proudly grabbing her chin in what she clearly believes is a cool pose.

For a moment, Minori considers that this might be some kind of trick, some elaborate tv show or prank, but no. A tv show wouldn’t risk getting sued for knocking her out and no one with a reason to prank her has these kinds of resources.

This girl can’t be anything but genuine. Or thinks she is, at least. She’s a bit old for it, but maybe she’s one of these people who’ve lied so much to be interesting that she actually believes herself to be special. To think she worried about telling a person like that she was possessed!

Or maybe she means actual human abductions - that might even begin to make sense.

“This,” Minori gestures vaguely at their surroundings, her voice getting shriller, “happened to you before?”

“Not exactly,” Kurata says critically, still walking on. The hallway around them glistens metallically in the distant red glow. “The aliens I met were much better hosts. We - my middle school club and I summoned them with telepathy. We gave each other presents.”

“Do you think I’m stupid, Kurata? Is that it?” Minori asks unpleasantly, quickening her pace.

She’s sick of this dark lonesome place that feels wrong, of this weirdo who keeps talking bullshit, of herself for always, always being helpless in circumstances outside of her control.

And, she thinks as her nails bore into her palms, she knows pretenders; she's lied before, just to kick people in the dirt while mocking them.

So there's no need to be polite here - if it insults Kurata, *good*.

“Were you even awake when we were taken?”

“How dare you doubt me!” Kurata cries, shaking an accusing finger at her, “after what we've been through, how I worried for you!”

She pauses for a moment. “Actually, I wasn't awake. But that doesn't change the facts, and the facts are that we got taken by aliens. I mean, weird lights, sudden change in places - it all adds up!”

It does add up and if ghosts exist, then aliens might just as well - plus, actual kidnappers wouldn’t let them walk around like this, would they?

It's the middle school story she can't believe - and now she's loathe to agree with Kurata.

“Where are these aliens then, if they went through the trouble of abducting us?”

Tome sputters, but before she can reply, they arrive at the corridor and at the sight both of them forget about fighting.

The corridor leads into a room and right in front of them is a translucent frame. Beyond it, there is something almost like a night sky - maybe if the night was darker and the stars brighter and moving and *more*. If it didn't change from one to the other to everything at once.

It’s beautiful, even though Minori never cared for this kind of thing.

There's the same monotony as to it as the scenery from a car ride has, but here, every change glues her to the view anew.

Space is mesmerising.

It's almost enough to make her forget that they're all alone here, without knowing how or why they got here. To make her forget her bad premonition, the ever-growing sense that something is wrong and they're not as alone as they think.

"It *was* aliens," Tome mutters reverently beside her.

Watching them move through the galaxy like it's nothing makes her feel sick now. Minori looks away and, following the same instincts that make her want to avoid the very places she searches for spirits in, she turns around.

A scream freezes in her throat.

So there is the alien that abducted them.

It looks more like she imagines ghosts to be - as if darkness gathered into a form, as if it's moving towards them. And as it moves, it solidifies.

Looking at it is like staring out into space was - except infinitely more horrifying. It makes her think of black holes and she trembles because this, she has seen something like this before.

Minori can't look away; she can't move either. The ghost, alien, whatever, gains on her, moving from one spot to another like its mere presence warps time and space.

And then it's touching her.

It's nothing and everything all at once, there is so much life running through her she could burst and yet her body feels heavy, uncontrollable.

(Not like back then: not like her mind being drowned in hot tar and emptiness and hate.)

((This time, it's not her body or her mind being taken from her.))

“Hey!” A shout pierces through the chaos inside her. “Take that! Shithead! Wannabe cryptid!”

The alien ghost or whatever lets go, still hovering beside Minori. A shower of white lands in her hair - and on the ghost, even though it seems immaterial.

There's a moment of stillness and in the uncertainty, Minori, wonders if it worked,

Then it moves again, this time towards Kurata.

She stumbles backwards, right into the frame, screeching, “Shit, screw you, Reigen-san! I knew that table salt was too cheap!“

Then, the alien ghost catches her and she freezes, her face filled with terror.

Minori takes a step and her body still feels disconnected, making her maddeningly slow. She feels weak, as if all the energy from before was drained. The ghost. That must be it, why its taken them.

Then, she’s there and it’s too quick - she doesn’t know what to do!

She garbles out Kurata’s name, barely able to control her tongue. Kurata looks at her out of the corners of her eyes, desperate.

Minori wants to scream. She stiffly reaches out to where the alien ghost is touching Kurata - feeding on her, but somehow, even though it’s right *there*, all she can feel is Kurata’s clammy skin.

That's when it hits her: they're going to die here in space all alone, she and this girl she barely knows, who tried to save her and is going to die first for it, right in front of her. And there's nothing Minori can do about it.

(Back then: she screams to stop over and over again as her body goes to attack daddy. When it pierces him, all that's left from the screaming is tears.

“This is happening all because of you,” is what the ghost says to her, calm and smug.)

Minori didn't want this. She doesn’t want this. Why is she always, always so *weak*?

She won't accept this, won't accept that despite everything, she cannot change a thing.

Minori screams and moves to push the space ghost away again, because she is so fucking angry, because she won't go down quietly.

The world explodes into blinding, deathly white. Minori breathes hard, somehow even more drained than before, tense and fist raised.

Her vision returns - but the alien ghost is gone. There's only Kurata leaning against the background of space, looking just as exhausted as Minori feels.

“Did you do that?” Kurata asks and doesn't wait a reply, “you didn't tell me you had ESP too!”

Minori looks at her hand and sees ghastly aftershapes of white, and somehow, she knows. It was her. She did it, she saved her. She doesn’t have to be the weak one, the bad one anymore.

“I… didn't know I could do that,” she confesses quietly, too out of it to plan what she should and shouldn’t share. “You have powers too?”

“Nah. But I know people - hell, I work for an exorcist! Though he's a sham.”

There is so much to unpack in that sentence, but Minori concentrates on: “Kurata-san, please introduce me!”

She has to meet them. Maybe she'll even find the one who helped her, but even if it's not, she needs to hear someone's experiences.

“Back at it with the honorifics, are we?” Tome cackles. Minori flushes, remembering their fight.

“I'm sorry, Kurata-san.”

“I forgive you,” Kurata says so generously it almost pisses Minori off, and gets a distant look in her eyes, “I'm used to people not believing me. But hey, I think after fighting space ghosts together, we're at first name basis, so call me Tome!”

And maybe it's because she's sick of being forgiven just like this. Maybe it's that Tome’s words strike her; this, she understands. But Minori wants to explain.

“It's not that I didn't believe you about the aliens, Tome-san. It's just… things so far beyond us… I couldn't believe they could be nice. In my experience, things don't work that way.”

“Gotta’ve been one shitty experience.”

Minori quirks a bitter smile, “Like you wouldn't believe.”

“Tell me about it some time.”

Surprisingly, Minori finds herself wanting to. “It’s a long story.”

“Well, if we don't find a way to get home, we'll have plenty of time.”

And Minori had almost forgotten in her glaze of fear and victory and someone to talk freely with, or more freely than with everyone else at least, that they were alone in space, where no one could reach them

Not even daddy.

“Let's search the ship,” she says.

Tome stands up energetically and almost falls. “You sure love ordering people around, huh, Minori?”

Minori flushes again, but there's no stab of shame like before.

“Takes one to know one, huh, Tome?”

And Tome doesn't cower or get angry like people used to when she riled them up; of course, back then, she wanted them to.

Tome laughs, loud, ugly and entirely genuine, and something very warm and pleased blooms in Minori’s guts.

“Let's check out that light first, it's probably interesting- and important too, don't look at me like that, Minori! “

They find the source of the light pretty quickly considering their state, in a room as big as the one from before. It looks like some kind of control board, consisting mostly of a glowing screen and machinery.

Tome approaches first, Minori following warily after. Knowing the ship belonged to that creature makes her suspicious.

“Be careful,” she says.

Tome nods distractedly, fully focused on the screen. She leans in and wonders out loud, “Now, what is *this*?”

And then it's like someone pressed pause on her body - her face gets an unnatural stillness to it. She doesn't look herself, and it scares Minori more than she'd admit.

(Did she look like this, back then?)

She pulls Tome away and she gives easily, eyes still transfixed. Minori pulls at her jaw harshly and yells, “Snap out of it!”

Their eyes meet, but Tome looks right through her. There's a film of red in her eyes as if they're reflecting the light even still and Minori fears, will it ever go away?

Then Tome blinks; her eyes return to their usual deadened dark and it's like life returns to her.

“Whoa,” she whispers before returning to her usual excessive volume, “that was *awesome*!”

“Was it?” Minori asks coldly. “Cause it sure didn't look that way to me.”

“Yeah, yeah, but listen to this.” Tome leans closer dramatically. “the ship connected with me - telepathically! And there was so much knowledge, just like this, it was amazing!”

“Did the ship say how to get home too?” Minori asks. She can’t understand how Tome is just fine with some thing poking around in her head.

“Yeah, actually. Just being here, we're connected to it, so we gotta just like, want to go back bad enough and it will bring us home.”

Minori shivers and glances at the screen suspiciously. She really doesn't like this.

But with that said, she wonders: if they're not home yet, does it mean she doesn’t want to go?

She thinks of being invited to a private chat by her new classmates, being shown an article on someone's phone. Being asked, ‘Is it true?’ about her possession and what actually caused everyone’s injuries and knowing, it didn't matter what she'd say; no one would look at her the same.

Of walking on eggshells around daddy because she's hurt him, even if she doesn't remember.

Of how hard it is to change completely when her old self is ever-present.

“High-school will be so boring compared to this,” Tome mutters. “If we flew off wherever, I wouldn't need to go through exam hell.”

And oh, she's not the only one reluctant to return.

Minori imagines just flying off into the universe with Tome; the space ship would bring them wherever they wished to go.

She could reinvent herself without ever being judged or pitied for her former self.

She thinks she could love that kind of future.

“Nobody will know what happened to us,” Minori says, as kindly as she can. “We have to go back. At least for a while.”

Tome perks up. “Right, as long as we have the ship, we can go to space any time! I don't want to miss that new movie either, so it's for the best.”

“It's for the best,” Minori repeats and now she can bring herself to believe it. She still has things left to do on earth, like finding out more about spirits and psychic power or trying out that new parfait.

And she'll have Tome by her side.

Maybe just because they'll return doesn't mean things will stay the same - maybe they will be better.

Or at least more interesting.

(At least, less lonely.)

Until the Moonlight Until the Stars

The day was warm, but the night is crisp and breezy pushing in through the open window of Shigeo's room. The wind plays with Shigeo's curtains and rolls the tubes of lip gloss scattered across the wood floor. There's compacts and make ups spilt throughout the room, along with stick on jewels and little things that glitter, finally broken out of the shoeboxes that typically house them. Out into the light of the floor lamps where they can really shine.

Shigeo looks at herself in her full length mirror, the one she keeps hidden behind her closet door. She pulls at her top so the stiff fabric won't cling so much to her and shock her with its static. It's never seen a washer, it's never had to, so it still looks nice and pristine in the privacy of her four walls.

She adjusts her plaid skirt down a little more to hide her knees, still not quite used to seeing so much of them.

She can no longer tell whether or not there's rouge on her cheeks, the cheap stuff never stays on and she feels warm enough to be blushing while looking at this girl in the mirror. '*A girl with a bowl cut*.' She sighs. Her extensions are too tangled to use and braid again. She notices the mascara she had brushed onto her lashes has fallen in annoying little flecks onto her cheeks.

She sighs again, and reaches for the wipes. Maybe that's enough for tonight.

With a wipe in hand she looks back at her reflection and jumps when she catches sight of the boy behind her in the window sill.

She turns toward the intruder covering her knees with her hands.

“Sup,” Shou says, taking a big unnecessary sip from his nearly empty fountain drink, admiring a poster on the wall. The curtains don’t seem to mind him at all, swaying about easy as they ever were.

When Shou finally looks at Shigeo he squints at her, and points under his eye. “Ya got a little schmutz right there on your…”

Shigeo wipes blindly under both eyes, almost jabbing herself with the motion.

“Are you going to school or something?” Shou asks, pointing his chin at her uniform quizzically.

For one panicked moment Shigeo moves to pull off her top but reaches for a nearby hoodie instead.

“No,” Shigeo says, muffled as she burrows through the thick fabric of the pull over. “This is just… the only skirt I own,” She says once she’s made it through.

Shou blinks at her, thoughtfully “Oh.”

Shigeo opens her mouth to tell Shou to leave but before she can Shou is saying, “I can get you more if you want.”

“…You can?”

“Sure! I know a guy.”

At Shigeo’s uncertain little frown Shou says, “Figure of speech. Just come on.”

And with that he hops out the window sill, onto what Shigeo can only assume to be the outside air, extending a hand for her to do the same.

She takes a moment to try and let common sense take hold, but more clothes is too tempting an offer to pass up. And it's been a long time since Shou has been any sort of threat.

With only a hint of doubt in her heart, she takes his hand and a steps into the air.

Before she can take another Shou says, "Oh but- you might wanna put on some shorts or something though…"

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Shigeo doesn't usually travel by telekinesis, the uneasiness that can settle in her stomach makes it unappealing. Nor does she usually sneak out of the house, but with Shou's steady and sure guidance it's a surprisingly nice way to enjoy the middle of the night.

With only the two of them in the sky she doesn't have to worry what people might think, seeing her in her skirt (with strategically placed gym shorts underneath). And in the sky traffic isn't so much an issue, in fact the lights of the cars on the bridge below are a pretty sight. Yellow on a blue canvas.

The winds here are stronger than most Shigeo's ever known, threatening to push her to and fro and make her nauseous, but it never happens. She can sense Shou's aura cushioning her as sure as the hand holding hers. And it helps her to focus on the steady movements of the boy as they go along. She smiles to herself at how little Shou's hair moves even as hers whips about wildly. *He must use a lot of hair gel,* she thinks.

She's excited. It must be a pretty trendy boutique they're going to to be open so late. She's been wanting to go shopping for so long, and even though she might only have enough money in her pocket for a single dress, it will still be double what she has now.
~~~

Shou leads them in a straight line up and across the water that separates the town from the city. Up and over the apartment buildings and streets and teens shouting way past their curfew. Up and up almost towards the moon.

The moon herself is so bright tonight. Full, almost bigger than the earth. Almost overwhelming but there's something about her that makes Shigeo want. Want to be so beautiful, so powerful. Wish she could own the night the way the moon did. Wear colors like the moon did. White and blue and silver. Really shine.

They begin their decent, like climbing down a staircase, toward a historic looking house in the middle of a city block that must have been refurbished to still be standing. And Shigeo thinks it must be a very exclusive place to make guests enter through a window.

"So this is the place," Shou says gesturing into a bedroom decorated wall to wall with posters of various pro wrestlers. Figurines line the shelves of characters Shigeo can almost recognize and sheets are spewn across the bed sloppily.

It takes Shigeo an embrassingly long time to realize this must be, in fact, Shou's room.

"Go ahead and take a load off, and I'll bring the stuff out okay?"

Shigeo just nods awkwardly as Shou zips out the room.

Shigeo takes a seat on the bed, the only place to sit, fiddling with her skirt and short combo and in no time Shou returns with a kick to the door and a "Tadaaa!"

A parade of boxes float in behind him, the one in his arms just for show, Shigeo can tell, since it is also surrounded by his aura.

He drops the boxes on the bed, making the whole thing bounce and says, "Alright! Take your pick! You can have it all, if you're so inclined." He smiles proudly.

Shigeo looks from Shou's shining face to the multiple tattered brown boxes before slowly opening one, finding numerous girl's clothing inside.

"Eh, thank you Suzuki-kun, but I made a promise long ago that I wouldn't take any goods I knew to be stolen."

Shou jerks backwards, throwing off his own balance before doubling over, laughing. "I didn't steal them! They're my-! Here just- wait- look." Shou pulls out a skirt, red plaid with blue zippers, and hands it to Shigeo.

Then he's off to another, smaller box that with a crane of her neck Shigeo can see contains various make ups and knick knacks and-

"Ah! Here!" And photographs, one now thrust toward Shigeo.

In it is a girl, much younger than the both of them, with red shoulder length hair and blue braces and... the same skirt Shigeo is holding in her hands. In the photo she is also wearing a blue hello kitty tank top with a plaid bow on the cat's ear. It's adorable.

"It's.. you?"

Shou blushes. "Yeah I know it's super embarrassing.. I used to wear braces."

Shigeo looks back at the picture.

"But anyway I didn't steal the stuff! Ya jerk." Shou smiles. "They're my old clothes, and you can have 'em if you'd like."

Shigeo's heartbeat picks up again. Just like it did when they were up so high the moon seemed bigger than the earth and she tries not to seem too eager when she flings all the boxes wide open with her powers.

"If you're gonna take that skirt though, you gotta take this," Shou says reaching back in the first box. "They go together," holding out the Hello Kitty top.

Shigeo smiles.

“Oh my gosh you know what I used to wear a lot?” Shou says picking up the smaller trinket box and giving it a shake before plucking out two dangly green earrings “These babies,” he says handing them to Shigeo.

“They’re clip-ons,” he explains. A relief to Shigeo who has yet to pierce her ears. She clips one on and with barely a moment’s hesitation clips the other onto Shou’s ear.

For a second she thinks maybe she’s made a mistake but Shou shakes his head to make the jewelry jingle, grinning.

Collecting clothing from Shou’s many boxes is fun. Shigeo’s never received hand-me-downs before, being the oldest and not yet big enough for her parents clothes. It’s like she has an older sibling for once. And Shou, it seems, is just as excited to give. Whenever Shigeo picks out a piece Shou tells her a story of the most interesting thing he’s done wearing the article in question. Falling off a bike, playing with a dog, going on a field trip, pulling pranks on various claw members…

Shou pulls out a particularly worn sweatshirt, with an “Ooo I remember this ol’ guy.” A pink hoodie with and owl on it that says, ‘Hoo are you looking at?’

“I used to wear this a lot when I was, ya know, startin’a change.”

“It looks like something you’d wear now.” Shigeo smiles.

Shou smiles too and pulls it over his head, posing dramatically once its on. It’s just this side of small on him and with his red hair and the single earring-

“You look like a rock star.”

Shou laughs and throws up the horns sign, sticking out his tongue. He stands to go look at himself in the mirror and grins.

“I do! Ya know, maybe I should wear this again, cut off the sleeves or something.”

“Then you’d really look like a musician.”

“Yehah!” Shou grins and takes off the hoodie in a hurry. Snatching a pair of safety scissors from the dresser and setting to work on a sleeve.

“Oh! Kageyama! You should- hold on- it's not…” he says digging through one box. “It's in-” he says digging through another. “Oh that's right, my dad told me to keep it hung up in case we, I dunno, go to a wedding? Or something? But you should take it! You'd be doing me a huge favor.”

Shou squeezes into his closet, disappearing for a second into the wall and emerging with the most beautiful dress Shigeo has ever seen.

A white dress with sheer blue fabric running a top it, making the whole thing otherworldly. It sparkles with silver glitter in perfectly spaced out dots across the skirt. A rose made out of silver silk sits perched at the shoulder, and a sash made of the same material makes a belt at it’s waist.

“And it comes with shoes!” Shou almost drops the dress on the floor but catches it mid air with his aura, looking guilty. He digs out a pair of sparkly grey kitten heels that look, to Shigeo, exactly like Dorothy’s ruby slippers, encrusted in grey rhinestones.

“I really hope they fit you. They're my last pair of heels and it would mean a lot to me if you took them.”

Shigeo can count on a single hand the number of people she's hugged in her entire life, and most of them her immediate family, but she throws her arms around Shou in an instant. She’s so happy.

Moments later and she emerges from the bathroom feeling like the most beautiful girl in the entire world. Like it doesn't matter how much her knees are

showing. Like she can walk right down the street in a skirt and a bowl cut and own it. Like she could ask Tsubomi-chan to dance at their next school function and not sweat right out of her shoes.

She feels bright, like she could rival the moon. Like she shines

beautiful things

This, Tsuchiya thinks, *is the ugliest garden I've ever seen.*

Overgrown kale plants droop unsupported over the side of the raised bed, and when a fat black bee lands on a cluster of tiny yellow blooms—a sign the plant has "overwintered", Mukai tells her (how does a seven-year-old know this much?)—the bee's weight alone sends the plant brushing against the grass. There are violets scattered between the lettuces and tiny pink primroses planted haphazardly beside tufts of grass. It's a mess of colors and untrimmed branches and browning leaves, but Mukai loves it, so Tsuchiya keeps her thoughts to herself.

"Hey Tsuchiya!" Mukai slams the back door behind her. "I found the clippers!"

She holds up a pair of pruners with red rubber peeling off the hand-hold. They're ancient, but they'll do, and if Tsuchiya's being honest, she doesn't know what "do" means right now besides clipping off a few leaves, but she'll go with it. Mukai has the biggest smile she's seen since Tsuchiya said she should live with her.

Mukai's first tooth fell out a week ago. It's one of her canines, pointy as a fox's, and she threw it so high into the air it almost hit the ceiling. Tsuchiya took at least ten pictures of that gap-toothed smile and right after, Mukai declared she wanted to keep the tooth. Tsuchiya let her, of course, but made her wash the blood off thoroughly in the bathroom before she stored it in the tiny clay pot she made in school on her desk.

She told Tsuchiya she wants a tooth collection. Mukai loves collections--she has a collection of leaves that Tsuchiya taught her how to press between her fattest mystery novels, a collection of rocks exclusively from construction sites, and a collection of candy wrappers which she says help her

remember the taste. They are all lined up on her bedroom desk, which leaves barely any room for school papers.

Tsuchiya doesn't understand why she feels the need to collect things (especially things like teeth), but if she wants to, she can. It's because of her constant cataloguing that Mukai knows so much (even though if there *were* room on her desk for schoolwork, Mukai probably still wouldn't do it), and Tsuchiya wishes she'd been that curious as a kid. And now, Mukai is curious about the garden.

The previous owners planted just out of the shade of the ginkgo tree and promptly abandoned it, it seems. But now--with Mukai's drawings of the neighborhood spirits up on the fridge, pull-up bar installed in the hall door frame, Tsuchiya's ABBA discs safely stored, and Mukai's field guides in the bookshelf by their bedroom window—they both feel at home and ready to conquer the garden that's haunted Tsuchiya since they moved in.

When Tsuchiya first asked Mukai to clean up her dolls after playing with them in her room, Mukai nearly cried. When she was Mukai's age, she cleaned meticulously, but she knows from years of teaching PE involving copious amount of supply clean-up to 6-year-olds that Tsuchiya herself was the outlier. That doesn't mean she'll stop pressing Mukai—just try and find fun clean-up activities when she can—and Mukai loves the garden so much that she's pretty sure she doesn't even think of it as cleaning.

Mukai, like with other forms of clean-up, is not a natural. She rips out tiny shreds of grass, so Tsuchiya shows her how to pull out by the root, which is probably the only thing she remembers from that gardening class she took with her ex-girlfriend ages ago. It takes Mukai a few tries to get the hang of it, but soon enough she's shoving handfuls of grass roots in Tsuchiya's face with a huge grin.

"Go throw those in the compost bin!" Tsuchiya says. "No, not that one, the one around the corner, the gray one—yeah, there you go."

Mukai skips back and holds up her dirty gloved hands. “Tsuchiya, come here,” she whispers.

She leans in even though she can see the twinkle in Mukai’s eyes, and then she smears dirt over Tsuchiya’s nose.

“Oh, now you’ve done it!” laughs Tsuchiya. “C’mere, you! I’m not gonna let you away free!”

Mukai giggles and runs behind the ginkgo tree. “Come get me!” she says.

Tsuchiya jogs over—exaggerated so it looks to Mukai faster than it really is—and smiles as Mukai shrieks and darts around to the other side of the tree. “You’re still too slow!” she shouts – even though Tsuchiya isn’t more than a yard away—and then Tsuchiya scoops her up.

“No!” Mukai giggles. “Put me down, you monster!”

She spins Mukai once and then obliges, setting her on the grass. “It’s payback,” Tsuchiya says.

“Next time I’ll be faster!”

“I’m sure you will be,” Tsuchiya says, and means it.

Mukai flops onto the grass and a few strands of hair fall out of one of her buns. “Tsuchiyaaa, please fix my hair for me!”

As Tsuchiya pins up her thick hair, Mukai points at the ginkgo canopy. “There’s a spirit living in there,” she says. “They’re like a little black bouncy ball. And they like chocolate. And milk.”

“Oh really?” Tsuchiya pats her head—their “I’m finished” signal, and Mukai sits up. “When did you feed them?”

“Right before dinner! Their mouth is huge!” Mukai spreads out her arms for a visual. A foot around? *Matsuo had one of those*, Tsuchiya thinks.

“Where’d you get the chocolate?” Tsuchiya asks teasily. “You didn’t take it from my stash, did you?” She pokes Mukai on the cheek and she laughs.

“No! At school the teacher passed out kit-kats for a special treat. I gave them half of mine.”

Mukai doesn’t break the kit-kats on the designated lines—she divides them horizontally, and it drives Tsuchiya crazy. Mukai thinks that’s hilarious.

“Oh! Mukai, how would you like to grow more vegetables in the garden?”

“Why?” she asks, quite rationally. She doesn’t like many vegetables.

“We can give them to the spirit so you don’t have to share your chocolate, silly!” *And get more vegetables in your diet*, Tsuchiya thinks.

Mukai’s eyes light up. “Yes! Can we go to the plant store tomorrow?” She’s rocking back and forth.

Tsuchiya glances over at the garden—still unruly, still overgrown. Less grass at least, and Mukai’s naming different vegetables left and right that will fill some space. With Mukai’s suggestions, she can picture it--vaguely, but it’s still there--in her head.

Right now, it really is the ugliest garden Tsuchiya’s ever seen, but Mukai’s loud enthusiasm is hard to ignore.

“Of course,” Tsuchiya says, and Mukai grins.

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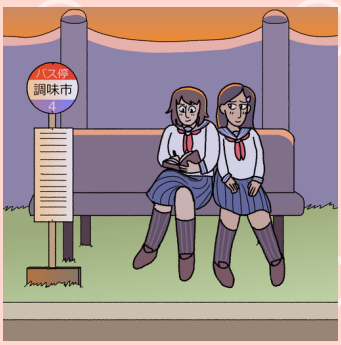

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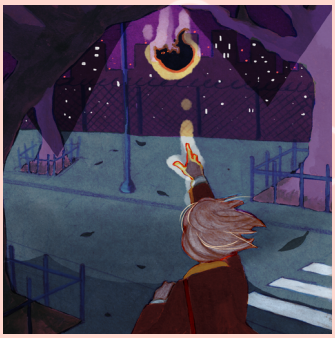

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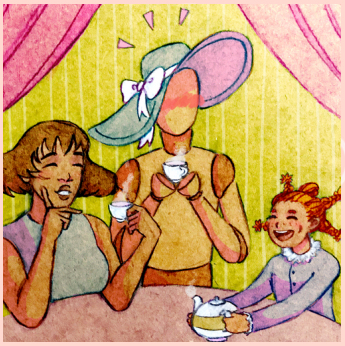

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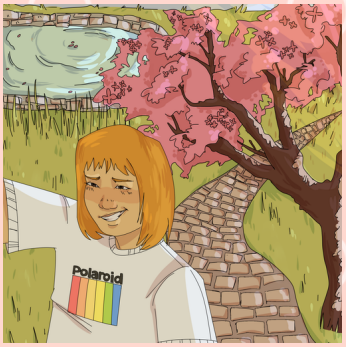

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